Tactics for Resilience and Resistance in the Face of HIV Stigma: Examining Larry Kramer's, Sapphire's, and Danez Smith's Stories

by

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> "I believe that telling our stories, first to ourselves and then to one another and the world, is a revolutionary act. It is an act that can be met with hostility, exclusion, and violence. It can also lead to love, understanding, transcendence, and community. I hope that my being real with you will help empower you to step into who you are and encourage you to share yourself with those around you."
>
> - Janet Mock

Introduction

Literature and history are entwined. Literature does not passively reflect history; instead, history and literature actively shape each other. According to New Historicist theorist Stephen Greenblatt, literature is a vital part in the "circulation of social energy" as literary works are not solely a product of individual authors but are also shaped by the historical events and cultural debates of their time, and in turn, these works influence and provide interpretations of those events and debates, creating an ongoing cycle of exchange and influence (Parker 264). New Historicists further believe cultural texts are the means by which history is made—not the other way around (Buchanan). From this perspective, literary texts are agents of history and, thus, interpretations of them are key for better comprehending history. Following Foucault's conceptualization of power and discourse, a major concern of New Historicists is to demonstrate how literary works are involved in the power-relations of their time as "active participants in the continual remaking of meanings" (Baldick). While theorists like Greenblatt are concerned that dominant power structures in society can "contain" resistance to a degree, this essay argues that the subversion of power structures in writings on HIV/AIDS did ultimately avoid total containment, thereby changing society to some extent.

To theorist Michel de Certeau, marginalized peoples (in this case those affected by HIV/AIDS) can only hope to fight or resist hegemony through the use of *tactics*, not *strategies*.

To De Certeau, a strategy is a "calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power… can be isolated." This is the characteristic attitude taken by politicians, modern scientists, and military strategists (36). De Certeau explains that the use of tactics, however, is "the art of the weak" (37):

> [A] *tactic* is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of the tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the means to *keep to itself*, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-recollection. (37)

The two methods of acting via strategies or tactics, what de Certeau calls the "everyday art of war," can be distinguished based on whether they rely on place or time (39).

The difficulty of deploying tactics becomes even more difficult when tacticians, including creative writers, come from marginalized groups and the historical events are seen as stigmatizing members of that community. Various intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression (based on race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, etc.) can make it difficult for minorities to assert their rights, advocate for themselves, and fight back through various tactics as they may be hesitant to speak out due to fear of stigma and discrimination, and they may lack access to healthcare, legal services, and other resources that can aid them.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic is one such event, with creative writers suffering from that condition (or living with or loving those with that condition) trying to intervene in recent history to resist the prejudicial perception and stigmatized treatment of those suffering from HIV/AIDS. HIV stigma comes from the fear of HIV—it is a complex, pernicious, and persistent issue. In the

early years of the epidemic, HIV seroconversion was often blamed on the newly HIV+ person because of their so-called "risky" behaviour in gay sexual activity or intravenous drug use. HIV+ individuals from communities of colour, especially Black and Latinx communities, and low-income communities, including those who are unhoused or living in poverty, are disproportionately affected by the HIV epidemic due to limited healthcare access and discrimination; women, particularly Black or Latinx women, also face additional challenges such as gender-based violence and limited healthcare access.

Authors living under these layers of adversity have the odds stacked against them, especially as they attempt tactics of resistance for themselves. Because of their oppressed status, their literary works cannot afford to be produced purely for aesthetic purposes, but they are also a means to accomplish something in the world. In this way, they are reminiscent of what J.L. Austin calls speech acts which perform something and have an agenda directed at someone else: "a perlocutionary act is one of getting somebody to do something; persuading (them to do something), convincing (them to think something), scaring (getting them to be afraid), insulting (getting them to be offended), amusing (getting them to laugh)" ("Definition of Term Speech Acts").

This essay will examine three perlocutionary acts, which can be seen as acts of resistance, in three works of American literature on HIV/AIDS: Larry Kramer's dramatic work *The Normal Heart*, Sapphire's auto-fiction *Push*, and Danez Smith's poem "recklessly." Rather than ambitiously taking on a more global approach to AIDS literature, this essay intentionally narrows its focus to specifically analyze American literature from 1985 onwards. This allows a closer examination of specific themes and patterns in these HIV/AIDS narratives in the light of America's distinct experience of, and cultural response to, the epidemic. There are many fruitful and creative ways to resist dominant belief systems and practices, but the goal of this essay is to focus on three:

the re-enactment of confrontational "naming and shaming" in Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, the portrayal of radical selfhood in Sapphire's *Push*, and the erotic focus of Smith's "recklessly." These literary acts of resistance made in relation to HIV and AIDS, both descriptive and imaginative across genre, intervene in cultural memory and history by reimagining the narrative of the body and its surroundings, resulting in a considerable shift in the way those with access to power, and society at large, respond to the HIV epidemic and those affected by it. By using the tactics of naming and shaming, first-person intersectional narration, and bodily reclamation, in their play, novel, and poem respectively, Kramer, Sapphire, and Smith participate in the larger political effort on the part of those suffering from the disease and their allies to change perspectives, opinions, and policies on their community and struggle.

Socio-Historical Context

The epidemic of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) was first recognized in the United States on June 5, 1981, when the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued its first warning about a relatively "rare form of pneumonia" in "a small group of young gay men in Los Angeles." The health conditions were "later determined to be AIDS-related" (KFF "Global HIV/AIDS Timeline"). However, HIV had been around for decades by then (Be in The Know "Origin of HIV and AIDS"). In 1982, the U.S. CDC established the term AIDS referring to four "identified risk factors" including male homosexuality, intravenous drug abuse, Haitian origin, and hemophilia A. In the early years, critics recognized the AIDS epidemic as "a crisis of representational discourse," especially as language was used to "subtly pit[] communities of 'high-risk groups'… against the 'general population'" (straight American society) (Howe 395). In 1983, a fifth risk group was added to recognize female sexual partners of HIV+ men (KFF "Global

HIV/AIDS Timeline"). In the same year, the term "GRID" or "gay-related immune deficiency" became "increasingly used by media and healthcare professionals," incorrectly linking gay identity inherently with HIV seropositivity (KFF).

By the end of 1991, only ten years after it was first recognized, 1 million people had contracted HIV in the United States, bringing a devastating number of the sick to 206,392 Americans, and the death toll to 133,233 (Jonsen 1). Since the outbreak of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, approximately 84 million individuals have contracted the virus. Currently, there are around 38 million people living with HIV, and over the course of the epidemic, tens of millions of people have passed away due to AIDS-related causes (UNAIDS "In Danger").

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has had a significant impact on American society, as evidenced by the large number of infected, ill, and dying individuals affected by this previously unknown disease. While the statistics and epidemiological reports provide a glimpse into the scale of the problem, they do not fully capture the extent of the social disruption caused by the epidemic. Each number represents a life that has been destroyed and countless others whose lives have been forever changed by the disease.

In *Milbank Quarterly*'s two-volume study, *A Disease of Society: Cultural Responses to AIDS*, Dorothy Nelkin begins by explaining that AIDS is a unique form of epidemic:

> AIDS is no 'ordinary' epidemic. More than a devastating disease, it is freighted with profound social and cultural meaning. More than a passing tragedy, it will have long-term, broad-ranging effects on personal relationships, social institutions, and cultural configurations. AIDS is clearly affecting mortality—though in some communities more than others. It is also costly in terms of the resources—both people and money—required for research and medical care. But the effects of the epidemic extend far beyond their

> medical and economic costs to shape the very ways we organize our individual and collective lives. ("Introduction" 1)

The AIDS epidemic is characterized by widespread stigma, discrimination, and inequalities, which is a recurring theme in HIV/AIDS research and AIDS literature. When HIV first emerged, it primarily affected "socially disvalued groups" (Jonsen 9); as the epidemic progressed, it increasingly impacted people who lack economic, political, and social influence. Thus, AIDS is undemocratic. Unlike "democratic epidemics" (Arras 19), where communicable illnesses affect individuals regardless of their class, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and pose a threat to the entire community, AIDS disproportionately affects certain regions and populations.

A notable aspect of the HIV/AIDS epidemic is its prevalence in and around major urban areas. HIV/AIDS is "a disease of neighborhoods and communities, of high-prevalence localities and low-prevalence localities," Albert R. Jonsen explains (244). For example, by December 1989, "87 percent of all cases in New York State" were "concentrated in the five boroughs of the city" (246-247); by March 1992, "95 percent of all cases" were from the five New York boroughs (247). From the inception of the disease in New York, there were two distinct manifestations of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, including one among gay men of different ethnic groups and the other among intravenous drug users and their families in inner city communities. In recent years, the number of cases among men who have sex with men and male intravenous drug users has become equal, with a growing number of cases among women and children (Jonsen 257).

Government response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the early years was sluggish, partly due to decreased "public spending on healthcare and welfare, and partly" because AIDS was initially linked to "two highly stigmatized minorities—gay men and intravenous drug users" (Jonsen 14). When action was taken, education for precautionary measures was limited by

restrictions on public funds (Jonsen 14). Media response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic was also slow in disseminating information about AIDS. Despite the fact that by the close of 1982, there were 800 documented cases and 350 fatalities from the disease in the U.S., and that both the CDC and leading medical publications were explicitly stating that the country was confronting a critical epidemioligical issue (Nelkin 297). Nonetheless, with the exception of the gay media and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which was swayed by the political influence of the gay population in that area, there were few write-ups in newspapers and periodicals until Spring 1983 (Nelkin 297).

While the responses of the government and media to the epidemic in the 1980s was slow, the early response of the gay community to the AIDS epidemic was marked by a remarkable influx of volunteer action (Jonsen 15). This movement was driven by the collective behavior of individuals coming together to care for their own in the face of a difficult and unprecedented situation. This response was not limited to individual caregiving efforts, but also included political advocacy through community-based organizations including the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and the Gay Men's Health Crisis (Elbaz 43) as they insisted on alternative perceptions of and treatments for people living with AIDS. Throughout the United States, specifically in urban centres like New York and San Francisco, volunteer movements carried a significant portion of the burden of caring for those affected by the disease, reducing the cost for "public agencies and private insurance" (Jonsen 15). However, the movement faced challenges from "financial constraints, burnout, and bureaucratization" (Jonsen 15).

AIDS activism was represented considerably in literature, as creative writers and artists began to address the impact of the disease on individuals and communities in creative and imaginative texts: for example, Kramer's *The Normal Heart* heavily represents AIDS activism and the various volunteer movements as the organizers continually argue over the effectiveness of their

activist tactics. These works dealing with HIV often tackle themes of stigma, loss, and survival, and helped to humanize the epidemic and bring it into the public consciousness. Over time, advances in medical treatment, as well as increased funding and public awareness, helped to turn the tide against the epidemic. However, the impact of the disease continues to be felt, particularly in marginalized communities, and new imaginative literature continues to emerge that reflects the ongoing challenges faced by people living with HIV/AIDS and their allies. HIV/AIDS narratives in a range of literary genres have evolved over the course of the HIV epidemic. In the early years of the epidemic, many works focused on raising awareness and increasing understanding of the disease, as well as documenting the experiences of those directly impacted by it. These works often tackled themes of stigma, loss, and survival, and sought to challenge dominant cultural narratives about the disease and the populations affected by it. In more recent years, as medical treatments have improved and the epidemic has evolved, the focus of HIV literature has shifted in some ways. While works about the disease and its impact on individuals and communities continue to be produced, late twentieth- and twenty-first century HIV/AIDS stories have also explored the intersection of HIV with other issues, such as aging, mental health, and community resilience.

Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart*

A notable and prolific AIDS activist, Larry Kramer is well-known for being one of the first effective—and angriest—activist voices during the AIDS epidemic in the USA. Along with playing critical roles in founding Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) and ACT UP (Rand 298), Kramer is an established writer and playwright whose debut play, *The Normal Heart*, was first staged at the Public Theatre in 1985. It is an autobiographical play about Kramer's tumultuous eighteen months working with GMHC until he was cast out of his own organization. Kramer's

main tactic is to stage a play in which he models public naming and shaming to effect change. The play revolves around gay writer and activist Ned Weeks who deals with public and private indifference towards the AIDS epidemic. The play's plot focuses on Weeks and a host of amateur activists who are simultaneously figuring out how to fight a disease no one understands while also keeping their non-profit organization up and running. As Weeks seeks to wake up the world to the crisis, he also deals with the personal toll of AIDS as his lover succumbs to AIDS-related illness. The play deliberately uses verbatim quotations and reworded summaries of Kramer's own articles, borrowing liberally from his personal history and lived experiences (Nelson 240). Weeks's (and Kramer's) goal in *The Normal Heart* is to communicate the truth without embellishment and "scare the shit out of you" so that people will be moved to action (35).

Class and Privilege

The protagonist of *The Normal Heart*, like Kramer, is a well-off, Jewish, HIV-negative, gay writer living in urban New York. As a gay man, Weeks faces the discrimination and apathy from wider society for his sexuality, yet is spared from facing the dangerous realities of racism, classism, sexism, and serophobia. Weeks is so well-off that his brother Ben says he could spend a million dollars to "have a house anytime" because he "[hasn't] done badly" in his writing career (24). As a man with a trust fund and a wealthy family, Weeks can be openly confrontational as he does not have to worry about losing his job if he were to come out of the closet. While his privilege allows him the security to speak publicly against systems that discriminate against gay people, especially HIV+ gay people, his privilege also blinds him from understanding how his personal views around the closet and promiscuity can be harmful towards others. As a privileged upper-class man, Weeks believes others should be out like him, declaring, "I think it's imperative that we all grow up now

and come out of the closet," despite lack of financial support in a time of incredible homophobia (38).

Naming and Shaming Government, Media, and Gay Men as Tactic of Resistance

Ned Weeks enacts Kramer's aggressive polemics, not surprising given that he is his stand-in. Weeks bluntly names, shames, and chastises notable political figures (including the city health service and federal officials), the media (especially *The New York Times*), and his own gay community for their complicity and silence throughout the AIDS epidemic. Part of Kramer's passionate rhetoric can be attributed to his Jewish identity and heritage. Because Weeks bears the memories of his decimated racialized community, he frequently compares the harmful popular response to the epidemic to the societal response during the Holocaust. Weeks's tactics of resistance are often forceful perlocutionary acts as his intention is to scare, insult, lobby incessantly, and convince as many people as possible to take action in the fight to help his community live. As he articulates in Act 2, Scene 9, "[w]e're being treated like shit. And we're allowing it. Until we force them to treat us otherwise, we get exactly what we deserve. Politicians only understand one thing—pressure!" (64). His goal is not necessarily to comfort those affected by HIV/AIDS, but to conjure up a widespread praxis to fight AIDS, prevent death, and preserve his gay community. As soon as Weeks's friends begin succumbing to an enigmatic illness, he takes prompt action by creating an advocacy group that later evolves into the Gay Men's Health Crisis: his main aim is to "raise money and fight" (25) the disease which has an unknown origin.

No tactic is off the table for Weeks: he is motivated to use every available tool for the sake of his gay community's continued existence. Paralleling the epidemic with the Holocaust, Weeks passionately argues, "Aren't there moral obligations, moral commandments to try everything

possible?" (30). Often in one swoop, Weeks will call out a wide range of people, implicating them in murder of those dead by AIDS-related illness. For example, in a phone call, presumably to a media organization, Weeks reads from his own writing: "It is no secret that I consider the Mayor to be, along with *The Times*, the biggest enemy gay men and women must contend with in New York… for ignoring this epidemic that is killing so many of my friends… And every gay man who refuses to come forward now and fight to save his own life is truly helping to kill the rest of us" (49). This is one instance of Weeks's tactic not only to subvert dominant power structures, but also to subvert his own community's notion of victimhood as marginalized peoples. Instead of only calling out the powers that be for their inaction, he insists on gay people's radical agency in also demanding their voices in the fight for life. Using intentionally provocative language, which often offends gay folks who esteem free, liberated sex, Weeks uses anaphora by placing "I am sick" at the beginning of several sentences to name and shame closeted "promiscuous" gay men who refuse to take action in their fight: "I am sick of guys who moan that giving up careless sex until this blows over is worse than death… I am sick of guys who think that all being gay means is sex in the first place. I am sick of guys who can only think with their cocks… I'm sick of closeted gays. It's 1982 now, guys, when are you going to come out? By 1984 you could be dead" (35). Weeks seems to give the gay community the hardest time because he rejects the notion that it is composed only of helpless victims facing a deadly epidemic. He boldly insists on the political agency of fellow gay men in his community and sees a distinct power in acting and speaking up.

There is a clever self-awareness to Weeks's activism that embraces the intent to rouse fear and basic human survival instincts. Weeks humorously recognizes that he seems to be the only "screamer" (41) in the GMHC and jokes that his activism is becoming known as "the Ned Weeks School of Outrage" (49). G. D. Hodge describes these resistance efforts as "serious teeth-pulling,

scare tactics, and begging" (358) and admits that this plan ultimately succeeds for the way his fearless advocacy brought in tremendous funding but also plenty of attention.

Weeks's colleagues are alarmed by his fiery polemics, specifically by an early draft of "1,112 and Counting" which acts as a health recommendation to choose abstinence and warns of a future without gay men if no one acts up (35). Mickey, who works for the New York City Health Department and is a member of the GMHC, slams Weeks's writing as "a bit much" (35). Bruce, the closeted, moderate president of Weeks's organization, criticizes it as something that will "scare everybody to death" (35) rather than promote action. Weeks sticks with his impulse, however, saying that "this isn't something that can be force-fed gently; it won't work… There are almost five hundred cases now" (35). Weeks's colleagues believe he is being "too political" (57), creating an unnecessary "panic," and selfishly making himself a "celebrity" (49) off those afflicted with AIDS, when the truth is that no other activists were willing to appear on TV or be interviewed due to the nature of their jobs or fear of stigma. In *The Normal Heart*, Weeks manages to have their organization mentioned in various newspapers, TV, and radio stations (49).

Limitations of Kramer's Shaming and Naming Tactic as a Form of Resistance

Despite Kramer's prolific history of HIV/AIDS activism and its marked success in many respects, his advocacy can be interpreted as fueled by a personal internalized homophobia. Critics like Douglas Crimp have noted Kramer's rage to be frequently most scathing towards fellow gay men, particularly those in government or media whom he suspects are closeted. This pattern or sign of internalized homophobia in his rhetoric could worsen, rather than improve, the public health response to the epidemic.

Dirk Visser corroborates this sentiment, as he argues that *The Normal Heart* promotes harmful "plague rhetoric" (14) which further blames people with HIV/AIDS for the spread of the virus. Visser explains that through Kramer's plague rhetoric, which repeatedly classifies monogamy not safer sex practices as the only tenable solution, he refuses to respect other perspectives in the epidemic that value the innovative kinship possibilities of multiple sexual partners.

Kramer's often aggressive, confrontational language also appears to reinforce the slut-shaming of people with HIV/AIDS for failing to domesticate their sexuality into an approximation of traditional heterosexuality. To Kramer, promiscuity and gay politics are one and the same. For example, Weeks says "the gay leaders who created this sexual liberation philosophy in the first place have been the death of us… why didn't you guys fight for the right to get married instead of the right to legitimize promiscuity?" (60). At the end of *The Normal Heart*, Weeks again separates promiscuous sex from, in his opinion, appropriate, chaste activism which mirrors his own monogamous sex life, saying, "Being defined by our cocks is literally killing us. *Must we all be reduced to becoming our own murderers?*" (86, emphasis added). Kramer insists on treating AIDS almost exclusively as a gay problem despite simultaneously railing against *The New York Times*'s misrepresentation of AIDS as solely a "gay disease." While other AIDS activists were attempting to ward off the common sentiment that gay men were to blame for the AIDS epidemic, Kramer vehemently charges the gay community for what he perceived to be its failure to give up potentially risky sexual practices and to take action on its own behalf (Rand 298).

David Román helpfully outlines how Weeks's extended rage against the sins of promiscuity implies, whether Kramer meant it or not, that gay men get what they deserve for transgressing heteronormative structures such as the "traditional model of heterosexual marriage

and monogamy" (62). Kramer's push for a controlled sexuality is rooted in the belief that monogamous gay couples—an approximation of heterosexuality—are immune from HIV transmission, yet Crimp explains that monogamy provides no protection whatsoever against a virus that might have already infected one partner in a relationship. Furthermore, Crimp explains,

> [gay people] knew that the alternatives—monogamy and abstinence—were unsafe, unsafe in the latter case because people do not abstain from sex, and if you only tell them 'just say no,' they will have unsafe sex. We were able to invent safe sex because we have always known that sex is not, in an epidemic or not, limited to penetrative sex. Our promiscuity taught us many things, not only about the pleasures of sex, but about the great multiplicity of those pleasures… Kramer's attitude about the formulation of gay politics on the basis of our sexuality is so perversely distorted, why [he insists] that our promiscuity will destroy us when in fact it is our promiscuity that will save us. (252-3)

The problem with Kramer's message is that he assumes "careless sex" to be hopelessly HIV-transmitting sex while he views his own partnered sex as non-HIV-transmitting sex. This is an unhelpful and inappropriate categorization for a public health crisis such as the AIDS epidemic: his idea that monogamous, private sex was somehow exempt from HIV transmission is where he further marginalizes members of his own community. His black-and-white thinking of "good sex" and "bad sex" seems to be fueled by his personal rage against his fellow gays for the way they tie sex to their gay identity.

It becomes increasingly clear in *The Normal Heart* that Kramer may hold a personal vendetta against what he perceives to be a hypersexual, anti-intellectual gay movement—and he arguably uses a good deal of the play as a vessel for his anger.

Sapphire, *Push*

Sapphire's *Push* (1996) was published 11 years after *The Normal Heart* (1985) and the HIV/AIDS landscape had already changed significantly in a little over a decade. By 1994, AIDS emerged as the top cause of death among Americans between 25 and 44 years old (APA *1990s HIV/AIDS timeline*). In the mid-1990s, the FDA initiated measures to tackle the risk of HIV and lower its transmission rate; for example, in 1996, the FDA approved the first at-home HIV "testing and collection kit" (APA). In 1997, there was a 47 percent reduction in AIDS-related fatalities in the U.S. and "highly active antiretroviral therapy" was adopted as the HIV treatment standard (APA). By 1998, the CDC reported that Black Americans reported for 49 percent of the U.S. AIDS-related deaths (APA).

Sapphire's novel is fitting for a time in which Black people are disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS. *Push* delves into the story of Precious Jones, an inner-city, formally uneducated Black girl from Harlem who gives birth to two children by her father before she is 16 years old and suffers sexual, emotional, and physical abuse from her mother; she also acquires HIV due to her father Carl's sexual abuse. *Push* might be considered a work of auto-fiction, as it is a fictional story based on actual experiences of the author and written in the first-person voice of the protagonist, Precious Jones. The protagonist's story is not "real," yet hers is real, in a sense, as Precious is a composite of many girls Sapphire cared for in her time teaching in the public school system. Sapphire's tactic with *Push* is to write a first-person novel that shocks the reader to the intersectional horror of one Black girl with HIV in order to effect change and inspire people to have more understanding and compassion for girls like Precious. The author creates the character of Precious not only, perhaps, to shock the reader into listening, but to foster empathy for those like her and thus to act to improve the situation. Sapphire's writing demonstrates that people like

Precious can flourish if they are given the opportunity to do so; for instance, Sapphire shows that Precious opts to access education when she is given the opportunity to do so. While both Precious and Sapphire are writing their personal experiences, their tactics of resistance are different because Precious is writing her own story, whereas Sapphire is writing the story of young women she witnesses suffering not only from HIV/AIDS, but from many other forms of oppression.

Disadvantages of Class and Lack of Privilege

Every experience in Precious's life adds to a seemingly insurmountable mountain of oppression related to intersections of her race, gender, class, ability, and size. The young protagonist is fat, Black, poor, illiterate, and a survivor of incest and other abuses. Eugene Bacon comments that her problems are "too profound for a band-aid fix" (32). She is emblematic of the oppressed class as someone deeply affected by the process of marginalization (Stapleton 215). Therefore, her activist tactics are totally different from Weeks's wordy polemics which come from a position of high privilege as a man of wealth and advanced education, who resides in an environment where it is relatively safe for him to be proudly out as a gay man. Expressed in her own dialect, style, and non-linear format, Precious speaks boldly about her lived experience and finds the words as she goes: through her autobiographical writing style, she documents her own evolution as she processes her abuse, her child, and being HIV+.

Sapphire troubles common HIV narratives by creating a story where AIDS is not the focal point of the novel, but merely one component. Coincidentally, Sapphire explains in the interview that "the prestigious and powerful did not respond" when sent copies of the novel, but "people on the margins of society did" (34). Push deals with a range of interconnected topics including "poverty, literacy, early childhood education, HIV, child abuse, urban devastation, and food as

abuse" (34). In many early 'AIDS crisis' white gay narratives and poems from the mid-1980s and 90s, AIDS is presented as the primary problem at hand: issues of class are seldom acknowledged and if they are, it is a passing mention.

Subverting Dominant Narratives by Expressing Radical Selfhood as a Tactic of Resistance

In *Push*, Precious uses the power of language as perlocutionary acts to resist stigma, empower herself, and survive. Through her writing, she compels the reader to realize the complexities of her marginalized experience. Through a non-linear, autobiographical narrative style, Precious works to subvert dominant narratives and challenge stereotypes about poor, Black women living with HIV. By writing herself into existence, itself a feat for such an oppressed person, Precious not only evolves individually, she also changes the world. In an interview, Sapphire expresses her belief in the radical power of personal storytelling explaining that "[a]s Precious heals, the social structure that is dynamic and not static is healed and changed also… by telling her story, she begins to challenge the invisibility of those who are the objects of racism and other forms of oppression" (Wilson 35). Precious's first-person narrative as an incest survivor, as opposed to a secondhand perspective, as in Toni Morrison's *Bluest Eye*, creates an "intimate dialogue" with the reader which grants an emancipatory "political agency" in Precious's storytelling (Donaldson 54): she is able to push readers to empathize with her marginalized perspective as a young Black, fat, poor teenager and abuse survivor.

Precious starts her story with an action of aggressive self-empowerment: "My name is Claireece Precious Jones. Everybody call me Precious. I got three names—Claireece Precious Jones. Only motherfuckers I hate call me Claireece" (Sapphire 6). From the beginning, Precious's crudeness cannot be separated from her testimonial voice, and it provides her control over her

narrative: this uncensored writing style is one tactic in Precious's arsenal. Monica Michlin notes that this literary convention allows a "reversal of hierarchies (social and literary)" and also "functions as stand-up comedy, and as a defense against melancholia or depression" (171).

By pushing herself to write, she slowly makes sense of the messy, interconnected experience of ongoing domestic abuse, illiteracy, and bullying. For instance, after describing a series of abusive experiences with her mother, Precious cuts to the present "now" where she is sixteen and pregnant once again: "all been getting mixed up in my head… Everything seem like clothes in washing machine at laundry mat—round'n'round, up'n down" (22). This image can stand-in for the narrative as a whole, yet, the dirty laundry also represents the exposure of the Jones's family secrets. Everything is "mixed up" and linked in Precious's life. Her abuse is a direct cause of her illiteracy. This illiteracy, then, is a direct cause of her being ridiculed at school for the verbal manifestations of abuse ("Secon' grade they laffes at HOW I talk," 36), but she is mocked for the physical symptoms too ("thas when I start to pee on myself," 36) and her size ("School I a joke: black monster, Big Bertha, Blimp B54 where are you?, 62). It is through her writing that she accesses her memories and is able to ground herself in reality: while reflecting on her baby, she recounts the painful experience of incest and comes to a profound truth: "I think I was rape" (68).

The novel's title, *Push*, is full of meanings for Precious's life, as she not only must push her father's baby out in childbirth, but she must also push herself to write, read, learn, attend support meetings, and care for Abdul. Ms. Rain, her teacher, recommends writing as the key to Precious's survival and says, "If you just sit there the river gonna rise up drown you! Writing could be the boat carry you to the other side. One time in your journal you told me you had never really told your story. I think telling your story git you over that river Precious" (97). Elizabeth Donaldson explains that through writing her life, Precious "figuratively gives birth to her self"

(58), yet Donaldson also acknowledges that this writing is still structured and inspired by rape: "I push him out my pussy" (68).

In Precious's journals, "A is for Africa" and "C is for colored we black" (*Push* 65): her story is definitively Black and informed by Black culture, Black authors, and her Black homosocial community. Her literacy is key for her liberation and resilience: "It's 26 letters in the alphabet. Each letter got sound. Put sound to letter, mix letters together and get words. You got words" (64). As Precious learns the alphabet, it is striking how the ABC's resemble the acronyms of disease—HIV and AIDS. This comes full circle as she reads *The Black BC's* to Abdul at the end of the novel (139), a children's alphabet book which includes Black contributions to American culture and society with each letter.

Once Precious is made aware of her HIV-positive status, she spends more time in group meetings including "Body Positive" meetings for HIV+ women and "Incest Survivor" meetings. She begins to journal more at the advice of her therapist, and works through the anger and alienation she feels about her diagnosis, noting, "I know I ain' the only one that got it, even though that's how it feels. But I'm probably the only one get it from they daddy" (110). Like other HIV narratives, Precious emphasizes feeling disconnected from her body, yet the domestic abuse she endures uniquely informs her experience as a Black HIV+ girl: "My body not mine" (111). In one of her poems, she describes HIV as a stalker or ghost that follows her:

Everi morning

i write

a poem

before I go to

school

marY Had a little lamb

but I got a kid

an HIV

that follow me

to school

one day. (143)

By the end of *Push*, while looking at her baby Abdul, Precious is able to see her own beauty: “Look his nose is so shiny, his eyes shiny. He my shiny brown boy. In his beauty I see my own” (140). The reader is also transformed by *Push* as Precious has created a close intimacy with the reader, forming an empathy for her messy, confrontational, marginalized story. Michlin explains that as Precious “reworks trauma into speech, implicitly turning her ‘life story’ into the novel we have before us, she teaches us to see those whom society continues to consider as ugly, contemptible, exploitable and disposable, as precious human beings” (184).

Precious’s way of fighting back against all kinds of abuse and diagnoses is not through a Kramer-esque confrontation of political indifference, but through the often explicit and unfiltered *confrontation* of writing herself into existence. This, in turn, subverts dominant, prevailing narratives around HIV as a majority white, affluent experience. In *Push,* both Sapphire and Precious demonstrate that HIV can affect anyone: HIV (and HIV activism) is not limited to the white gay community (as many mistakenly still believe) and no one is guaranteed safety from transmitting or acquiring HIV. *Push* is a novel of a woman finding her voice, power, and identity through language. In the end, Precious notes, “them words everything” (66).

Limitations of Sapphire’s First-Person Intersectional Narrative as a Tactic of Resistance

One possible tactical limitation of *Push* is that it is a complex story and not an easily digestable read for audiences familiar with popular (white) HIV resistance stories such as *Angels in America*, *The Normal Heart*, and *The Band Played On*. Sapphire "queers" the common HIV story of a white, well-off, gay man living with HIV with Precious's narrative. Elizabeth Donaldson explains how *Push* blends genres and defies generic literary boundaries:

> As a self-consciously realistic version of *The Color Purple* and a simultaneously fictionalized rendition of *The Courage to Heal*, a classic of the incest survivor self-help tradition, *Push* transgresses generic boundaries in order to depict technologies of the self which constitute a speaking subject's indoctrination into literacy. At the same time, *Push* depicts a subject's disciplinary rupture of the official discourses which contain her. (52)

In *Push*, Sapphire entwines HIV with other elements of suffering and pain including poverty, illiteracy, domestic abuse, and racism to make a story that reflects the varied experiences of the underserved, devalued Black girls she cared for as a teacher (*Push* 183). Amidst a plethora of white gay HIV narratives, Sapphire's tactic is to reveal the human caught in the complex issues affecting people like Precious. Implied in *Push* is Sapphire's overarching sentiment that to meaningfully address the AIDS epidemic is to dismantle the racism and colonial attitudes of American culture, not just homophobia/heterosexism that other white gay writers rally against. Consequently, the antagonists in *Push* are not merely individuals; they are the systems of oppression that subordinate and oppress.

This presentation of the antagonists contrasts with that in Kramer's *The Normal Heart* where the "villains" are more easily identifiable than they are in Sapphire's *Push* as they are quickly named by Weeks in his confrontational callouts throughout the play. The scene is set fairly quickly, and audiences are almost immediately presented with the antagonists that they need to

focus on, including the self-hating and/or closeted gays who hesitate to publicly fight back, apathetic media outlets like *The Times*, and indifferent government officials—basically anyone who refuses to be loud, get angry, be shamelessly vocal about their support for those affected by HIV, and fight back for their livelihoods.

In *Push*, Precious's parents are her first bullies, and they mercilessly abuse her as a child, yet, they are not the sole antagonists of her story as they, also, are subjects/victims of the same oppressive system that dehumanizes and renders invisible Black people. Precious does not have the means to "fight back" against her parents or the system which marginalizes and subjugates Black people—but she can write.

Danez Smith, "recklessly"

Danez Smith's collection of poems in *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017) is unique for its exploration of the author's HIV+ condition alongside death and Blackness. Unlike Kramer and Sapphire who witnessed the early years of the HIV epidemic, Smith, who is a generation younger than Kramer and Sapphire and HIV-positive, unlike these earlier writers, is in more intimate connection with HIV's contemporary reality (Huber 217). In a 2017 interview, Smith describes how the collection was first "two books, one that held a lot of poems written in the year following my positive HIV diagnosis and another written around the continuing narrative of state-sanctioned and home-grown violence against Black people in the USA" (Williams). At the editor's recommendation, Smith joined the two into a larger project which deals with many "different thoughts on mortality and living" (Williams). *Don't Call Us Dead* traverses the personal and political aspects of the HIV epidemic in an emotionally resonant way. Through rich, illustrative figurative language, images, and flowing motifs, Smith gives voice to millions affected by and living with HIV—specifically

gay people of colour. The poem "recklessly" writes back to history and HIV stigma to insist that the Black, queer, poz body is one bursting with life, pleasure, and desire. Like Sapphire's *Push*, the perlocutionary act in "recklessly" is how it inspires the reader to witness the Black queer speaker's unique point of view and lived experience with HIV and demands the action of attention, empathy, and re-perception.

A Lack of Privilege

Smith, who goes by they/them pronouns, finds themself at the intersection of several social prejudices: they are Black, queer, working-class, and face the stigmatized experience of living with HIV (Juncosa "I Got the Cell Count Blues," 50). Even before HIV, the Black, queer body is already vulnerable due to the various and increasingly institutionalized forms of anti-Black violence that continue into the twenty-first century. While the author is able to access life-saving HIV treatment and healthcare, Smith is acutely aware that this is not a reality for others in the Black community, especially because of strong HIV stigma. In "1 in 2," Smith includes a haunting statistic from the CDC: "On February 16th, 2016, the CDC released a study estimating 1 in 2 black men who have sex with men will be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime" (61). Smith addresses this anxiety in "every day is a funeral & a miracle":

> i got this problem: i was born
> black & faggoty
> they sent a boy
> when the bullet
> missed. (66)

Even before Smith seroconverts, it is noted throughout their poetry that the possibility of acquiring HIV feels inevitable for a Black queer man (Juncosa 47). In this collection of poems, HIV is repeatedly referred to as a form of imprisonment, and this takes on heightened meaning as Smith grapples with disproportionate, discriminatory incarceration facing Black people in the United States.

Centering Sexuality to Reclaim Poz Pleasure, Culture, and Joy as a Tactic of Resistance

In "recklessly," the speaker refuses to let their story be totally overtaken by seroconversion, so, instead, through a tactic of collage, the speaker reclaims their body and sexuality through references to Black culture, music, and eroticism. For a poem titled "recklessly," it certainly is fragmented in its juxtaposed collection of feelings, sayings, quotations, and socio-historical context. Smith's poem is dedicated to Michael Johnson, the former college wrestler sentenced to 30 years in prison for "exposing" sexual partners to HIV through "reckless endangerment" (CDC "HIV and STD Criminalization Laws").

The poem is not shy about reflecting on the depth of shame and exhaustion caused by this "bloodprison" (41) for HIV+ people: stigma internalizes quickly and overstays its welcome ("the diagnosis is judgement enough"). Calling back to the gay community's traumatic history with plague and quarantine due to the HIV epidemic, the speaker notes that "many stories about queerness are about shame / … [we] shall not lie with (mankind)" (41). In particular, in his use of the phrase "shall not lie with (mankind)," Smith references Leviticus 18:22, a biblical text Christians often use to denounce homosexuality, specifically gay male sex. The poem dialogues with religion's more harmful influences as a force of shame for queer people, linking them with immorality, outsiders, and the damned.

Even though the speaker is burdened with the resonance of HIV stigma, they resist this condemning "sentence" (41) by piecing together various rich, emotional, and full-bodied Rhythm and Blues voices in the collage, including words or phrases from Alicia Keys's "You Don't Know My Name," Lauryn Hills's "X-Factor," Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance with Somebody," and Beyoncé's "Drunk in Love" (Williams). Additionally, the repeating refrain "I got the cellblock blues" and "I got the cell count blues" (41) interpolates a line of Langston Hughes's "Weary Blues," itself a free-verse metaphor for the life of a Black man, into the body of his poem (Juncosa 49).

After this sprawling collage of references appears, the poem turns in a new direction as the speaker dives head deep into their instinctual desire for men:

> singing recklessly out of a boy's/throat, driving recklessly with boy/hands, lay my mouth on a man/as you lay a boy/into bed/ruin a boy like a boy/running recklessly/in the rain in Easter white/as boys do/eating recklessly with a boy's/hunger, praising recklessly whatever was near/knelling/recklessly with a boy's knees/in front of convenient gods/when morning came & still i was/recklessly a boy's throat/until he was done & everywhere on my body was a boy's throat/yes, i was his if only once/& i was his/as well & i was/everywhere, like a god/or a virus & i was everything/required of me & i was anything/but tame/& so, so long from then/i stand in the deepest part of night/singing recklessly, calling/what must feast/ to feast. (42)

In the light of the poem's dedication to Johnson, the forward slashes may represent how HIV impacts sexual intimacy and the force of its interruption on those it affects. Despite HIV not being a death sentence anymore with proper treatment, the slashes are enmeshed in the speaker's most

intimate moments. Sam Huber aptly explains that "death is everywhere in Smith's poems, entwined with every intimacy" (229).

As the word "recklessly" is repeated throughout this section, it seems the speaker intends to strip the word of its loaded, criminal meanings that negatively reflect on HIV+ people regardless of the way they acquire the virus. This effective tactic adds passion to the slew of erotic energy between the boyish speaker and his lover. More than a sexual encounter, together they are recklessly in romantic love: "running recklessly/in the rain in Easter white/as boys do" (Smith 42). HIV is cleverly used as a metaphor to describe how the speaker is all over the boy: "i was his/as well & i was/everywhere, like a god/or a virus & i was everything/required of me & i was anything/but tame" (42). Despite the haunting blues, the speaker insists on a buoyancy of spirit as they rejoice in their lover's body. Instead of being moved to withdrawal in their dark night of the soul, they confidently launch forward and over the shame: "i stand in the deepest part of night/singing recklessly, calling/what must feast/ to feast" (42). This "feast," itself loaded with religious meanings, is a retort to the previous religious shame as it suggests heavenly reward, even royal banquets, for gay poz people of colour, too. In the face of despair, this feast insists that there is more glorious life ahead despite the diagnosis. Life is not over by any means—it has only begun.

The speaker experiments with different perspectives around their new status: they attempt to see it as "a love story": "he came/over / & then he left / but he stayed" (43). The possibility of irony is present in Smith's poem, yet there remains a dash of hopefulness especially considering Tim Dean's provocative article "Breeding Culture," where he attempts to build an optimistic view of HIV that envisions possibilities of solidarity between poz people. Dean explains that seropositive people can possibly bond fraternally over their condition as one blood "brotherhood"

(78). Perhaps in "recklessly," the speaker feels some comfort about this peculiar "love story" as the man who transmitted the virus to them continues to have a permanent impact ("he stayed").

This mysterious lingering presence of a man is reminiscent of the Christian divine who dwells with mankind—perhaps even lies with mankind—leading the poem's speaker to fix themself upon the future, on desire, rather than changing the past. The speaker focuses on the lover and submitting devoutly to the "body boiled down to desire":

> as the car rolls into his garage
> as you become a kind of garage
> as the skin breaks as the skin do
> as salt overwhelms
> your simple palate as you sing
> salt devotion as salt
> gives way to salt as you are
> a body boiled down to desire (44)

In this passage, the taste of a lover proves stronger than the stigmatized illness, and shame is repelled for another day. Through this erotic resistance, the speaker is reassured of life's sweetness:

> ritual, sweet lord
> i've seen thy wrath
> & it taste like sugar
> lay thy merciful hand
> around my neck (44)

Fueled with loaded religious language of "devotion," "wrath," and "thy merciful hand," the speaker is practically the psalmist who says "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8,

NRSV) and is redeemed by their faith. Like a pilgrim arriving at their destination, their pleasure is increased, not diminished, because of their tribulations. Because of the joyous reclamations of spirit and body exclaimed in "recklessly," there is a therapeutic reassurance that death is not their reality as it might have been in the past:

it's not a death sentence anymore

it's not death anymore

it's more

it's a sentence

a sentence

The speaker is able to meet HIV as simply a sentence because they met their "cellblock blues" with a compilation of feeling, rhythm, and pleasure. As a fragmented collage of voices and feelings, "recklessly" functions as a poignant reclamation of poz dignity and sexuality;–the speaker continues to desire and be desired. They are more than a sentence; they are a sacrament.

Limitations of Bodily Reclamation and Sacramentalization as a Tactic of Resistance

This poem, "recklessly," in particular is about the shock of acquiring the virus, hence the fragmented sections and amalgamation of lines. In this form of lyrical delivery, it is possible that readers may manage to glean the wide-ranging impacts of HIV on the speaker, including the impact on one's sexuality as a poz person. However, there is a concern that the collage technique employed in "recklessly" can become too overloaded to appeal to a wide readership. The lack of a clear speaker and voice in "recklessly" is one limitation of the piece: often the poem reads as a stream of consciousness piece. Because of this fragmented style, Smith's poem lacks a strong intimacy with the reader as is developed in Sapphire's *Push*. Readers must read between the lines

if the collage of meanings is to penetrate them. To read between the lines, the reader needs to expend significant energy unpacking the poem to make sense of its overlapping or layered meanings. Amid the many identifying intersections addressed in “recklessly” including ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation, the narrative of HIV can become difficult to follow.

Finally, there is a risk that the explicit descriptions of sexuality in Smith’s poems, including “recklessly,” will turn away potential audiences. In “recklessly” there are numerous detailed, graphic descriptions of sexual intercourse, bodily fluids, and religious language is often used in these passages. While sexual reclamation is important for poz people, this tactic of resistance may be perceived as too risky or transgressive to HIV- people due to lingering stigma and serophobia.

There are certainly clear benefits to Smith’s poz representation, especially as so many remain unaware that U=U (undetectable equals untransmittable) and that a poz person on life-saving treatment cannot transmit HIV because their viral load is undetectable. Reading about one Black, queer, poz person’s erotic pleasures can be a revitalizing, healing experience for people facing such blatant daily discrimination. At the same time, this tactic may challenge the prudish inclinations in many readers that might discourage further interest. Furthermore, explicit sexual imagery as resistance may also divert attention from other important, tangible issues related to the ongoing spread of HIV, including unequal access to healthcare, safer sex practices, regular HIV testing, and other points of discrimination.

Conclusion

It is difficult to know empirically which of Kramer, Sapphire, and Smith's tactics were most effective at bringing about political, social, or cultural change. However, each tactic contributes to the larger socio-political effort to counter and subvert oppressive narratives around HIV/AIDS. Some of the author's tactics expect more from their community, while others focus on empowering and comforting their community. Each of the HIV/AIDS writings examined involve the subversion of power structures and ultimately avoid total containment and absorption into the system, thereby changing society to a degree.

Kramer's (and Weeks's) showcasing of the naming and shaming tactic of resistance in *The Normal Heart*, while controversial, is significant in inspiring direct political action to fight back against the spread of HIV and societal complicity. The autobiographical play makes use of more confrontational perlocutionary acts as it intends to scare, insult, and provoke media, government, and the gay community to compel them to attend to the urgent cause of the early AIDS crisis. Sapphire aims to shock and inspire empathy in the reader by writing a first-person novel about one HIV+ Black girl who is an amalgam of several Black girls she has taught. Sapphire's and Precious's tactic is to write the self and their lived experiences into existence. In doing so, they subvert dominant narratives around HIV and challenge the reader to reevaluate their commitment to empathy and justice. Smith's poem "recklessly" foregrounds sexuality to reclaim the Black, queer, poz body, granting it autonomy, liberation, and agency. Both Smith, and the poem's speaker, seek to confront the reader with HIV+ pleasure, culture, and joy as a tactic of resistance which demands the reader actively reapprehend them (and others like them) and their lived experience with empathy.

While some tactics of resistance may have wider reach and effectiveness, every tactician's efforts are needed for fighting back against stigmatized illness, ongoing discrimination, and societal indifference to HIV/AIDS. The creative and imaginative acts of resistance are not in competition with each other. Instead, these writers build on each other's works in the larger artistic struggle to oppose prejudicial treatment of HIV+ people and inspire action to help HIV-affected communities.

Epilogue

The impact of Kramer's play is undeniable. Its many revivals and showings demonstrate the longevity of Kramer's tactics of resistance and a renewed public interest in the HIV crisis. *The Normal Heart* was first staged by New York's Off-Broadway Public Theater in 1985, when discussions about AIDS were not yet common in film, TV or even the American Presidency. The play forces audiences beyond the tight-knit queer community to confront the realities of the HIV epidemic. The play ran at The Public Theater for over 200 performances and it was subsequently staged in Los Angeles and London (Franklin "Theatre"). It enjoyed a revival Off-Broadway in 2004 and eventually made its Broadway debut in 2011 at the John Golden Theatre: for its Broadway showing, the play was nominated for five Tony Awards and won three, including the coveted Best Revival of a Play award (Franklin). In 2014, Kramer adapted the play for film, and it premiered on HBO with Ryan Murphy directing (Hetrick "Film"). Most recently, *The Normal Heart* was revived once more by the National Theatre in 2021. In each of its productions, names of the dead and state-by-state death tolls are incorporated into the set design, making the play a mobilized memorial (Rich; Rockwell Group). News stories, HIV statistics, and other texts recounting the early days of the AIDS crisis are also major focal points of the play's set design. In

its earliest productions, audiences were encouraged to add to the list of the dead making the play a living memorial (Rich); this was important, particularly at a time when acknowledging the epidemic was limited, and the prospects of a lasting memorial were non-existent. *The Normal Heart* paved the way for theatre to serve two critical roles in addressing AIDS: memorialization and activism.

Sapphire's *Push* garnered literary success quickly, and almost as soon as the novel was published, she received proposals to adapt the book into film (NPR "Sapphire Releases Graphic Sequel to 'Push'"). Thirteen years after *Push* was published in 1996, the novel was made into the 2009 film *Precious*. Sapphire eventually agreed to accept director Lee Daniels's offer and *Precious: Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire* debuted in theatres in November 2009 backed by influential Executive Producers Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry (Griffin 182). The film was a box office success earning over $63 million worldwide on a $10 million budget (Box Office Mojo). At the 82nd Academy Awards, *Precious* was nominated for six awards, including Best Picture, Best Director for Daniels, and Best Actress for Sidibe. Mo'Nique received the award for Best Supporting Actress, and Geoffrey Fletcher made history as the first African-American to win a screenplay award at the Oscars by winning for Best Adapted Screenplay (IMDb). In 2011, Sapphire released the sequel to *Push*, named *The Kid*, which follows the life of Precious's son, Abdul, after Precious dies of AIDS-related complications (NPR "Sapphire Releases Graphic Sequel to 'Push'").

Published in 2017, Danez Smith's second poetry collection *Don't Call Us Dead* (which includes "recklessly") was a poetry finalist in the 2017 National Book Awards (National Book Foundation). At 29 years of age, Smith became the youngest recipient of the £10,000 Forward Prize for *Don't Call Us Dead*, beating out the work of U.S. poet laureate Tracy K. Smith (Flood

The Guardian). In 2020, Smith released their third poetry collection, *Homie*, which won the 2021 Minnesota Book Award for Poetry ("Minnesota Book Award Winners & Finalists").

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